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SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN E-JOURNALISM - TWO WEBSITES IN VANGUARD,
BUT HOW VIABLE?

1. Summary: Two Egyptian websites - Masrawy.com and ArabAmbassador.org are striving to establish themselves as credible Egyptian Internet news sources. Masrawy styles itself as a reliable source for general news, while Arab Ambassador aims to serve as a "bridge" between the Arab and western worlds by publishing regional news and point of views. However, both outlets are confined by their finances -- a Masrawy editor claimed that the website does not have the budget to do its own reporting, cobbling together content from international wire services; while Arab Ambassador is funded largely out of its Editor-in-chief's own pocket. Whether Internet news websites can effectively compete with Egypt's traditional print media depends largely on websites' ability to raise revenue to fund news reporting and continued operations. End summary.

2. The design and content of Masrawy (www.masrawy.com) appears similar to popular Internet news content providers Yahoo.com and Google News. (Note: Masrawy is part of the Cairo-based LINKdotNET Internet company, which also controls the popular website MSNArabia.com. End note.) Masrawy, which is updated regularly by a team of content editors who work 24/7, is strongest in its international and Egyptian news sections, reporting on the activities and statements of Egyptian government officials and opposition and Islamist leaders. Masrawy has consistently reported on student and Kifaya demonstrations after they occur (sometimes reporting on planned demonstrations beforehand), arrests of Muslim Brotherhood members, and Egypt's human rights situation during the past several months.

3. PA officer with met with Masrawy's economic news content editor, Sameh Awadallah, on June 13, who explained the website's staffing and editorial process. "We have several content departments one for news, one for finance, one for sports, etc.," Awadallah reported. "We take news from various online news services, like AP or Reuters, and put it together in reports." While much of Masrawy's staff has studied journalism and writes for other Egyptian newspapers, the website does not have the resources for original reporting. When asked if Masrawy pays for the content it takes from wire services, Awadallah said, "No. We just take it from the Internet and publish it sometimes under Masrawy's name and sometimes under the wire service's name. We don't have the budget to do our own news reporting or pay for wire services."

4. Arab Ambassador is published online weekly in Arabic, Hebrew, and English at www.arabambassador.org. Whereas Masrawy reads like a news wire service's website, Arab Ambassador's website reads more like a newspaper. The publication's Editor-in-chief, Ashraf Gaber, told PA officer on June 1 that he funds the website with his own money, staffing it with editors and translators who are mostly in their 20s with journalism studies background. Like Masrawy, Arab Ambassador compiles reports from information gathered from other sources. However, Arab Ambassador's staff does conduct interviews, produces some original reporting, and writes regular commentaries.

5. Gaber explained that Arab Ambassador began as a monthly print publication to 5,000 subscribers - mostly Arabs living overseas in the U.S., the UK, and Australia. Gaber decided to post the newspaper online to reach a larger audience. "My mission is for the newspaper to be a bridge between the Middle East and the West by expressing Arab points of view and letting the world know how Arabs think," Gaber explained. (Note: Gaber, an advocate for the blind, also publishes a print edition of Arab Ambassador in Braille at his own expense. End note)

6. When asked about advertising, Gaber stated, "It's hard to find advertisers in Egypt. I do what many newspapers and websites do, which is publish free advertising for companies to try to encourage them. I hope that when they see I can do a good job for them, they will pay. So far though, no one's paying." Without using his own funds, Gaber claimed his newspaper and website would fail. "You need lots money and connections to have a successful website in Egypt. Sure, you can do a website on the cheap, but then the quality is bad and people won't read it. There's just no money for the Internet in Egypt right now," Gaber complained.

17. Comment: Although Egyptian news websites are becoming known among Egyptian reporters and Internet users as a credible source of information largely because they translate into Arabic accurate Western reporting - these websites face serious financial challenges to becoming viable competition to Egypt's traditional print media. However, with Egyptian Internet users currently estimated by the Ministry of Telecommunications at over four million and growing, the possibility for a vibrant and successful online news community rivaling print and TV media in Egypt exists. End comment.

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